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WATER POLLUTION:

EPA accidentally causes massive spill in Colo. river

Phil Taylor, E&E reporter

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A U.S. EPA team investigating mining contamination in southwest Colorado on Wednesday morning accidentally triggered a massive release of rust-colored wastewater into Cement Creek, threatening drinking water, fish populations and paddling on the Animas River that flows south into Durango.

EPA estimates the "blowout" at the Gold King Mine north of Silverton in San Juan County released about 1 million gallons from behind unconsolidated debris near an abandoned mine portal.

There were several EPA workers on site at the time of the incident, but none was harmed, the agency said.

The San Juan County Board of Health and Sheriff's Office yesterday said they "strongly advise" the public to avoid contact with water in Cement Creek and the Animas.

It is still unclear whether the spill will harm downstream aquatic wildlife, including brown and rainbow trout, south in Durango.

According to a report in *The Durango Herald*, EPA personnel were using a track hoe and other heavy equipment to clear dirt from in front of the mine in order to install a pipe to pump out contaminated water. But workers soon realized there was more water under pressure than they'd expected.

"This unfortunate incident underscores the very reason EPA and the State of Colorado are focused on addressing the environmental risks at abandoned mine sites," David Ostrander, director of EPA's emergency response program in Denver, said in a statement yesterday. "We are thankful that the personnel working on this mine cleanup project were unharmed. EPA will be assessing downstream conditions to ensure any impacts and concerns are addressed, as necessary."

The San Juan Mountains region was heavily mined between 1871 and 1991, leaving many waterways, including Cement Creek, inhospitable to fish. Surveys show the 2 miles of the Animas downstream of the creek are also devoid of fish, and there have been precipitous declines in fish populations as far as 20 miles downstream since 2005, EPA said.

The river upstream of Durango normally runs a deep green color but as of yesterday took on the color and thickness of carrot juice, Jonathan Thompson, a senior editor with environmental magazine *High Country News* who lives in Durango, told KUNC.

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Joe Lewandowski, a spokesman for Colorado Parks and Wildlife, said state officials have placed four cages of fish in the Animas in Durango, which is about 50 air miles south from the spill, to see how they handle the runoff.

While fishing opportunities are marginal due to the region's historical mining pollution, Lewandowski said "this kind of runoff is obviously not good for aquatic insects or any kinds of aquatic life."

The spill will not affect drinking water in San Juan County, said Willy Tookey, the county administrator. The county's roughly 700 residents get their drinking water from Bear and Boulder creeks, which is a separate drainage.

The city of Durango yesterday said tap water remains safe for residents. The city of roughly 17,000 stopped drawing water from the Animas on Wednesday, and is instead relying on water from the Florida River, which was not affected by the spill.

"However, the water taken from the Florida River is not enough to meet the daily demands during the summer months and is usually supplemented with water from the Animas River," the city said. "Because the City will not begin pumping water from the Animas River until notified that it is safe to do so, we are asking residents to immediately take steps to reduce their water usage and discontinue all outdoor watering until further notice."

The Animas flows south toward Farmington, N.M., where it joins the San Juan River and turns northwest into Utah, eventually emptying into Lake Powell. Contaminated water was approaching the New Mexico state line as of late morning, according to a report from the Associated Press.

Megan Crandall, a spokeswoman for the Bureau of Land Management in Utah, which manages recreation on the San Juan, said there are five rafting groups scheduled to put in to the river today and that rangers are trying to contact them to warn of the spill. She said it is unclear when the pulse of mining waste will arrive.

"We are strongly recommending that recreationists avoid recreating in or on that portion of the San Juan until we know more, and at the very least until that pulse of mine waste passes," she said. Groups that do decide to raft should bring extra water to wash their dishes, rather than use river water, Crandall said.

EPA yesterday said water was still flowing from the Gold King Mine, but at a slower rate. It said water sampling has occurred, though results are still pending. It is also monitoring pH levels and other water quality parameters.

EPA's work at Gold King is part of a larger project to reduce the flow of heavy metals from the nearby Red and Bonita Mine to the Animas, according to an EPA fact sheet in May.

The agency began working on a bulkhead -- a "massive plug" -- to control the discharge of contaminated water coming out of the Red and Bonita Mine, which is a significant source of zinc in the river. Once filled with water, the mine workings would be denied the oxygen needed to contribute to acid production and leaching metals, EPA said.

"Along with this work, EPA also plans to remove the blockage and reconstruct the portal at the Gold King Mine in order to best observe possible changes in discharge caused by the installation of Red and Bonita Mine bulkhead," the fact sheet said. "The Gold King Mine is the

closest mine to the Red and Bonita Mine and is located higher on the mountain. Entry into the Gold King Mine workings will depend on the conditions encountered following portal construction."

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